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Part I

The Ethnographic Background

Chapter 1

The Setting

THE ISLAND

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Okinawa lies a day's voyage by steamer to the southwest of the Japanese island of Kyushu. Leaving Kyushu, the ship passes along the Ryukyuan chain until it reaches Okinawa, the largest of the islands. Land is never completely out of sight until the ship enters the port of Naha, capital of the southern Ryukyus.

The Ryukyus are part of a long string of islands which, beginning in the north with the Kurile Islands and Sakhalin, run all the way south, including Japan, the Ryukyus, Formosa, the Philippines, and the Indonesian archipelago. In their offshore position on the Western rim of the Pacific Ocean, the Ryukyus are within access by small craft from Japan, Korea, and China. This geographic position of the Ryukyus puts them within the sphere of influence of several countries,

[133]

[648]

a fact which has been a determinant in their historical development and an important factor in speculations about prehistoric events.

Until further archaeological evidence permits greater certainty, the original settlement of the Ryukyus is believed to have taken place predominantly from the Asiatic mainland, with occasional influx from the southern islands, Formosa, the Philippines, and Indonesia (Kerr, 1958). Surviving culture elements of great antiquity support these theories. Most frequently cited are a basic form of Shinto, characteristic of the religion, and the shamanistic role of the priestesses. Specifically, the "curved jewels," formerly worn by all priestesses, are mentioned as apparent links with the neolithic cultures of Japan.

On the other hand, sporadic contact with the islands to the south is evidenced by culture traits, such as raised houses of tropical design (common to all of Japan) and perhaps the practice of "mother roasting," a period of recuperation after the birth of a child during which the mother is kept near a fire. This custom is widespread in Malaysia (Cole, 1915:155).

Linguistic evidence points to a separation of Okinawan from a common proto Japanese language about 1500 years ago (Hattori, 1954). This may indicate a southern movement of peoples from Japan under the pressure of the Yayoi people who introduced the wet rice complex into southwestern and central Japan at this period. That this was not the earliest settlement of the Ryukyus, however, is evidenced by remains in the Ryukyus of the earlier Jomon period.

From the first mention of the Ryukyus in Chinese annals of 605 A.D. until the end of the nineteenth century when Japan formally annexed the islands, they stood in a curious relationship of dependency toward China and Japan. Both nations claimed suzerainty over the kingdom of Okinawa with its royal court in Shuri and extracted tribute. Eventually the Lord of Satsuma in southern Japan extended his sovereignty over the Ryukyus. But with ties to China remaining, Okinawa participated in both Chinese and Japanese culture, which disseminated through the urban trading center of Naha into the outlying areas. It is this intermediate cultural position which still gives Okinawa a peculiar character, although it long ago became part of Japan and abandoned direct contacts with China.

In 1872 Japan formally declared its claims on the Ryukyuan kingdom, and after deposing the last king in 1879, made the Ryukyuan islands a province of Japan, with the capital at Naha. Between this time and the present, intensive contact with Japan has led to an overwhelming absorption of Japanese culture, a willingness on the part of Okinawans to adopt Japanese ways and to identify with Japan as their

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home country. Nevertheless, many aspects of Okinawan life still suggest an earlier phase in which independent developments gave the islands their own particular culture.

The Okinawan people, approximately 655,000 as counted in 1954, live in an area of about 454 square miles. Their major economic activities have traditionally been agriculture and fishing. In 1945 a long, peaceful existence was brought to an abrupt end during the final battles of World War II in the Pacific. As a result of world conditions Okinawans have been placed under American administration for an indefinite period of time. Today large numbers of men—and some women—find employment as unskilled and semiskilled laborers with the American forces. Gradual training for highly skilled jobs widens these opportunities for employment. Indirectly Okinawan life is influenced by Americans through stimulation of trade, building, and improved health conditions. Land requirements of the American forces in some areas also have influenced the settlement pattern. While these changes have affected the entire island to some degree, the greatest changes are noticeable in the central part around Naha where American administrative and military personnel are located. The village of Taira in the northern province of Kunigami, where the present study was located, had been subject to relatively few of these postwar changes in 1954. Isolated since earliest times because of mountainous terrain, this part of the island participates, as it probably always did, marginally in cultural influences which affect the center of the island. A great deal of cultural stability has therefore been preserved until the present day.

Nevertheless, it is useful to remember that the population of northern Okinawa is linked with the rest of the island by an efficient communications system. Roads connect almost all settlements in the north with the central island, and a bus transportation system extends its service into the remote areas. But long before all villages were connected by road with the center of Okinawa, people of Kunigami province traveled by foot over the many trails which traverse the mountains, and, since the turn of the century, many have left their home villages. Some went to Japan as laborers; others settled in the Japanese-controlled Islands of the Pacific, and some families joined the numerous Okinawan settlements in South American countries.

LANGUAGE

Taira people are bilingual. Okinawan, which linguists consider a separate language, has many regional dialects, some of which are not

Amami Oshima, Okinawa, Miyako, and Yaeyama.[1] Although they appear to differ widely, mutual intelligibility prevails, and informants from other islands assured me that they had managed to understand Okinawan in a short time though most preferred to use Japanese rather than attempt the new dialect. 197

Okinawan Dialects The Okinawan dialect area, Okinawa and its offshore islands, contains many sub-dialects or local speech groups, all of which are easily mutually intelligible. It would be an exaggeration to state that there is a distinctive dialect for each community; yet the variety and diversity of local speech forms constantly impresses one. Nakasone has distinguished five dialects in the Kunigami area alone, and this does not include nearly a dozen and a half distinctive speech islands within the same area.[2] These local speech peculiarities are often pointed out with considerable pride and seem much prized as symbolic of a community's identity. [621]

The dialects of Naha, Shuri, and certain of the larger towns such as Itoman and Yonabaru, are quite distinctive and easily recognized by the Okinawans. Naha dialect is most widely spoken and easily understood throughout the island, and because of its association with the capital carries the greatest prestige among Okinawan speakers. Old residents of Naha complain that their dialect has deteriorated and become coarsened since the war due to the heavy influx from other areas of people who speak the dialect imperfectly. By this they refer to the loss of certain polite forms and the inundations of Japanese. Some Shuri people will contend that the "best" Okinawan is spoken in their city. In the past this was undoubtedly a widely accepted point of view, but with the advent of Japanese administration---exile of the king, removal of the capital to Naha, abolition of the upper classes---Shuri's prestige as a cultural center rapidly declined. A number of informants, rural and urban, felt that the "purest" Okinawan was heard in the Naha theaters, particularly at the Naha Gekijō, where daily performances of modern and historical dramas are presented. Itoman dialect is considered to be very coarse and rough by the people of other communities, and hence is accorded a low prestige. This is in part due to certain prosodic features of the dialect which render it unlike other Okinawan dialects, but more likely it is due to the fact that this town largely derives its livelihood from fishing, an occupation regarded with opprobrium by farmers and urbanites alike. The neighboring farm village of Kanegusuku, though less than a quarter of a mile away and long associated with Itoman, preserves a dialect distinct from it. [554] [177] [548] [177] [545] [554] [326]

This dialectic diversity on Okinawa reflects to a certain extent the physical isolation of the typical village, a tightly-nucleated cluster of dwellings surrounded by fields. It is also a product of the social structure in the Okinawan kingdom. Prior to annexation by Japan (1879), farmers were little more than serfs bound to the soil and forbidden to leave their native village, while the gentry and nobility were for the most part concentrated in the urban Naha-Shuri district. Rural villages tended to be isolated, self-sustaining units; most were composed of a dominant kin group (munchu) and several smaller and possibly remotely related kin groups, or of several unrelated kin groups more nearly equal in size. A munchu was made up of a number [361] 197 105 [566] [565] [621]

[1] Miyanaga /Miyara/, 1950, p. 39.

[2] Nakasone, 1937, pp. 242-258.

195 A munchu was made up of a number
197 of households or families united through the male line, descended from a common
[619] ancestor, and sharing a common tomb. Village endogamy was an obligatory mar-
[582] riage practice and violations did not pass unpunished; in addition kin group
endogamy was a preferred practice, though not necessarily an obligatory one.
[628] Intervillage contacts and ties, consequently, were held to a minimum. These cus-
[178] toms were followed by the majority of the oldest generation now living, and
even today such practices tend to persist in rural areas. A survey in Kanegu-
[582] suku revealed that fifty percent of the marriages were between members of the
same kin group and sixty-six percent of the marriages were between residents of
[178] the same village. Such practices, to be sure, are breaking down, and this be-
comes evident when the above data are analyzed on an age basis, but in view of
the fact that these customs still prevail, though to a more limited extent than
formerly, it is not surprising that so considerable a diversity of dialects
should also be preserved.

197 Another facet of Okinawan dialect geography is the occurrence of small
621 speech-islands exhibiting dialects distinct from those of the surrounding areas.
184 These are the so called yaadui settlements founded during the 18th and 19th cen-
turies by migrants from the Naha-Shuri area; the newcomers were usually the
younger sons of gentry families seeking their livelihood in the country. Such
settlements not only enjoyed a political independence from the larger surround-
ing communities but also were never incorporated into the formal religious
system centering on the nuru priestess and unifying the rural areas. These
factors together with previously-mentioned marriage practices enabled such set-
tlements to preserve their identity. Kitazato in Kami Motobu-son serves as a
good example of this type of village, having been settled seven generations
ago by the younger sons of gentry families residing in Naha and Shuri. The
larger neighboring villages never absorbed Kitazato, and to this day it pre-
[194] serves a dialect quite distinct from theirs. The most notable contrast be-
tween them centers on the p and h sounds in the two dialects, for all p sounds
of nearby Gushiken are rendered h in Kitazato; thus, the word for "fire" is pi
in the dialect of the former and hi in the latter's.

197 Undoubtedly this dialectic diversity is decreasing as the old customs
179 die out and the isolation of the village disappears. The war uprooted many
communities and scattered their inhabitants about the island, and nearly all
villages now have a number of families new to the village since the war. New
communities like the entertainment center of Koza have no characteristic dia-
lect of their own, containing as they do a heterogeneous population recruited
from all parts of the Ryukyus. The vast improvements in roads and transporta-
tion services since the end of the war have given the people a mobility un-
dreamed of in the prewar period and have done much to destroy the isolation of
the rural areas.

192 "Uchinaaguchi" Okinawans call their dialect uchinaaguchi and themselves
[101] uchinaanchu. The terms 'Okinawago', Japanese for Okinawan
language, and 'hōgen', Japanese for dialect, are also in common usage though
the latter term is resented by some who feel that it carries the connotation
"rustic". Today all Okinawan speech contains many loan words from Japanese;
this obtains for those who know no Japanese as well as for those who are bi-
lingual. Intimate contact with Japanese coupled with this word borrowing has